

R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 015 857

RE 001 071

PSYCHOLOGICAL EMBARRASMENTS OF READING.
BY- KINGSTON, ALBERT J.

PUB DATE 30 NOV 67

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.52 11P.

DESCRIPTORS- *EVALUATION, *READING, *PSYCHOLOGY,
REINFORCEMENT, WORD RECOGNITION, READING HABITS, COGNITIVE
DEVELOPMENT, SKILL DEVELOPMENT,

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE CURRENT THINKING IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF READING IS PRESENTED. IT IS CONTENDED THAT READING SPECIALISTS HAVE BORROWED FROM PSYCHOLOGY WITHOUT REGARD FOR A TOTAL THEORY OF READING. DEFINITIONS OF SUCH CONCEPTS AS READING HABITS NEED TO BE MADE EXPLICIT. IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT MORE ATTENTION BE DIRECTED TOWARD INTEGRATING SCHEDULES OF REINFORCEMENT WITH THE ABILITY OF THE LEARNER. THE FUTURE OF READING RESEARCH IS CONSIDERED TO LIE IN THE INTENSIVE STUDY OF LIMITED SEGMENTS OF READING BEHAVIOR. THE GOAL OF THIS RESEARCH WILL BE TO DISCOVER ONE OR TWO PRINCIPLES AT A TIME. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL READING CONFERENCE (TAMPA, NOVEMBER 30 - DECEMBER 2, 1967). (BK)

①

National Reading Conference
Tampa, Florida
November 30, 1967

ED015857

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE
PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS
STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION
POSITION OR POLICY.

Psychological Embarrassments of Reading

Albert J. Kingston

The University of Georgia

Many reading specialists seem to contend that their sphere of activity is firmly anchored in psychological knowledge and methodology. A superficial examination of the terminology and concepts employed, indeed lends some credence to this contention. Closer examination, however, leads one to wonder whether reading as a discipline is actually any more closely wedded to psychology than is any other area of activity that occupies the educationist.

Both modern reading and psychology undoubtedly were influenced by the educational, philosophical, and social movements of the nineteenth century. During the period between the World Wars, education, however, seems to have been largely

RE001 071 T20

influenced by rationalistic and Gestalt psychology. During this same period, in contrast, more psychologists appear to have espoused empirical and behavioristic approaches to the study of behavior. Thus it can be observed that while Gestalt influence waned among psychologists, reading specialists as well as other educationists, seemed to continue to explain the teaching-learning process largely on Gestalt principles.

Nor was the reading specialist apparently obligated to rely^{only} upon Gestalt psychology. Typically he became eclectic and freely borrowed other concepts, laws, principles, or research findings to suit his various purposes. If one is to judge from the many varied and often conflicting statements made about reading, the major function of psychology today is to serve as a reservoir to be fished in whenever a particular research finding seems to fit in with reading methods, or whenever a new nomenclature is needed to label current practices.

One can only conclude that the relationship between reading and psychology at present is either that of a shotgun wedding, or even a casual liaison rather than a lawful wedding. It should be pointed out, however, that the fault is not due to the reading specialist alone. Until recently few of our most productive psychologists devoted their energies to studying reading behavior. Even today many behavioristic psychologists are reluctant to deal with covert behavior of the type necessary to understand reading. As a result we do not at present have an adequate, systematic, and carefully

formulated psychology of reading. It also should be noted, moreover, that there seem to be pressures which lead able young reading specialists away from theoretical formulations. Today reading is tremendously important. Millions of school children are being taught to read. Most reading specialists seem to be continuously busy trying to teach teachers how to teach children to read and then, ^{we} even busier trying to teach teachers to teach children who other teachers have failed to teach. It also is an interesting commentary on the reading profession, that prestige and financial rewards appear to be considerably less for the theorist and investigator than for the materials developer and 'expert' in pedagogy.

The lack of adequate theories about reading, however, should be a continuous source of embarrassment to workers in reading. The lack of theory not only causes confusion to parents and teachers, but also makes much of the current heated debate about methods and materials meaningless. Moreover, the lack of theory tends to reduce much of the current so-called research to the level of demonstrations and action-research.

As an illustration let us examine the often cited statement that reading is a complex process. All reading specialists apparently agree that reading is a complex process. This statement is justified by listing the various word recognition skills typically taught and then by adding a list of so-called comprehension skills. Some experts with a more global view also add auditory and visual perception skills,

thought processes and a few even add personal-social qualities such as motivation, and life-time reading habits. Unfortunately those who seek to extend the categories only serve to cloud the issue. These experts are reminiscent of the parent whose three year old son asked him what a penny was. The parent, anxious to inform, answered thusly:

"The penny is a circular shaped object approximately two millimeters in diameter. It is made of copper alloy. The American penny has one side that is called "heads" and the reverse side is called "tails". These two sides are mainly used in a game called flipping pennies. It has another side but this side is so small we rarely pay attention to it and it isn't even milled. The penny is also called a cent. On the head side is a bas-relief of a famous American president, Abraham Lincoln. His profile faces to the right. On the reverse side there is a bas-relief of a building with columns. This is the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. If you could read and are not hyperopic (far-sighted) you can see the phrase "In God We Trust", the word "Liberty" and the date-- all inscribed on one side. The other side has the words "United States of America", one cent, and E. Pluribus Unum.

Having thus carefully described the coin in detail, the parent was certain he had satisfied his child's need. Unfortunately the young son still didn't realize that a penny is a coin that in today's economy has little value except for possible use as a partial payment of a sale's tax.

Reading specialists are a lot like the parent in our

anecdote. They have compiled many different lists of sub-skills thought to be important in reading. They have correlated reading behavior with hundreds of other facets of human behavior. They speak of the many aspects of reading behavior, to illustrate its complexity, but then ironically speak of "reading ability" as if it were a unitary characteristic.

Traditionally the psychologist speaks of "process" in contrast with "structure". A process involves a continuous series of successive but interdependent changes or events. Process, then, implies some sort of transformation taking place in time and obviously represents something that is dynamic rather than static. Presumably the reading process has to do with the manner in which the human organism perceives and apprehends graphic symbols. Taxonomies of skills add little to our understanding of this process, other than to suggest that in order to engage in the reading process, an individual must include certain abilities in his repertoire of behavior. Granted certain perceptual abilities, the reading process becomes one of cognitive functioning. It would seem to follow then that reading is not a complex process. Rather the thinking process is complex.

That reading and thinking are related is not new. Yet we have not been able to separate thinking while reading from thinking as thinking. If all thought is basically identical, it should prove a boon to reading research. Again if thinking while reading differs from other patterns of cognition these

differences should be demonstrated experimentally. It might be that a series of longitudinal studies of excellent readers might throw light on this problem.

The development of more adequate theories concerning the nature of the reading process are essential if we are to remove one pervasive source of embarrassment. Failure to grapple with theory building can only prolong the already obvious state of confusion.

Reading Pedagogy Another source of embarrassment in reading lies in the nature of reading pedagogy and its present day record. Despite tremendous concern, mountains of materials, and great expenditures of money, it is a dismal fact that many children today fail to attain competency in reading. The reasons for the failure have been laid at the door of teachers, basal readers, the home, the pupils themselves and practically everyone and everything. Obviously an extensive treatment of the reasons why typical pedagogy fails cannot be discussed here. A better strategy perhaps would be to mention one or two points that are rarely expounded in the reading literature.

First it should be apparent that reading pedagogy has been subject to the same trends that have affected other aspects of education. Progressive education, for example, left its marks not only upon the American classroom but on reading instruction as well. Perhaps the teaching of Dewey, Kilpatrick, and others has left an emphasis which was not intended. Overconcern for the happiness of pupils, the lack of

systematic, sequential daily instruction, puerile vocabulary control, lack of drill and repetition may have resulted from this movement. Learning to read is hard. Reading, as other types of learning, requires activity on the part of the learner. Sitting in a little group around a teacher may be pleasant but does not ensure the active participation required for learning.

It should be noted that all learning theorists stress the importance of reinforcement in learning. Basal readers presumably provide for reinforcement by repeating words throughout the prose materials. Apparently this procedure is inadequate for many children. More attention must be directed toward developing different schedules of reinforcement to meet individual needs.

Two other embarrassments should be mentioned. Developmental reading methods stress the word as the basic conveyor of meaning in language. Thus vocabulary typically represents a major source of control. The control of vocabulary probably limits the speed with which bright children acquire reading skills as much as it facilitates the reading of less able children. Another problem, it seems to me, lies in the underlying implications of teaching word recognition skills. Presumably the most efficient technique is to recognize a word instantaneously. This is called sight vocabulary. When a word is not part of one's sight vocabulary, one should use configurative clues, phonics, or structural analysis. When these techniques do not work the reader is urged to examine

the surrounding words in which the unfamiliar word is embedded. This technique is called using context clues and presumably serves to narrow the probabilities of correctly guessing the unknown word. The procedure makes use of the redundancy of our language and presumes that such techniques are well formulated and can be readily taught.

A major weakness in teaching word recognition sequences is the variable cognitive styles developed by humans during the pre-school years. Even first grade children seem to have developed individual methods of coping with problems and tackling new tasks. It is unlikely that many readers employ the classical sequence of word recognition skills. By contrast there is evidence that indicates that many good readers simply skip the unknown word and continue their reading. Because they are bright and English is highly redundant they usually can supply the correct answers to simple comprehension checks ** of the recognition type multiple-choice question.*

It also might be pointed out that although reading instruction at the beginning stages emphasizes word recognition skills, by the intermediate grades the reader is exhorted to read "thought-units" not words. What thought-units are is not clear!

Reading Research Because of its importance, reading has been lavished with funds for research purposes. It should be embarrassing that after such expenditures so little has emerged in the way of theories about reading or knowledge about how

it is learned. We now know, if we didn't suspect it before, that teachers are significant variables in the classroom, that some children will learn to read regardless of the methods used and that some do not. Most of the funds spent seem to have been spent on what Stanley has called ~~quasi-experiments~~ and pseudo-experiments. The so-called first grade studies are a case in point. The problems of studying reading behavior in a school setting with intact class-size groups are overwhelming. The one ^{amazing} ~~aging~~ question is why we continue to pursue such fruitless paths? In most of the studies reported in the literature it is impossible to even differentiate the major differences between the materials being studied. Typically they are not so different as day and night, but rather share many common features. Similarly we have meager knowledge of the other daily experiences shared by children during the day. Hopefully the child is exposed to reading during the entire ^{school} day. Finally most of us would rather have our own children taught by a master teacher using old-fashioned materials rather than a poor teacher with the latest curriculum. In most reported studies such an important concept as the Hawthorne effect seems to have been ignored.

Science has had its greatest impetus from the discovery of principles that apply to a limited range of events. The future of reading research lies in the intensive study of limited segments of reading behavior. We are more apt to learn about how the human reads or learns to read when researchers experiment with one or two children under carefully

controlled laboratory conditions. The goal will not be to solve all the problems about reading but to discover ^{exactly} one or two principles, ^{at a time} ~~that the studies must be replicated with~~ ^{new subjects} ~~Then to replicate these experiments.~~

Reading Pretensions

A final source of embarrassment lies in the failure of the reading specialist to face up to his own limited knowledge. Reams of paper are consumed by writers offering prescriptions for reading instruction. ^{avalanches} of material for classroom use are produced annually, ^{And} correlational studies still are reported ad nauseum. Reading teachers still feel they can teach children to become critical readers by selecting a few passages for pupils to criticize. If the child dares to criticize his other texts, he is reprimanded. He only may criticize where ^{and when} he is told to. The modern reading specialist ^{also} vows he will make all children develop life-time reading habits. What exactly good life-time reading habits are is never explained. As with much in reading there are no operational definitions. If the reading teacher is asked what are the criteria for judging life-time reading, the answer will be delightfully vague. Does the truck driver who reads a comic while waiting at the loading dock have the habit? Does a clerk who takes a magazine to the bathroom? Does it mean looking at the sports page daily? Are there quality as well as quantity factors? I must confess to small feelings of guilt when I hear some of my colleagues talk. I read constantly, but mostly professional works, popular magazines, newspapers, and "who-done-its". I rarely read the classics I was exposed to in school and college.

Reading specialists must explicate their thinking, produce more meaningful research, and be content to build a discipline that is more empirically based and less grand and pretentious.